DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 239 CS 211 227

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TITLE An Evaluation of Integrating Literature in the Composition Class.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Classroom Research; *Cognitive Development; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Problem Solving; Reader Response; *Reading Writing Relationship; Student Writing Models; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Perry Scheme of Intellectual Ethical Development; Writing Development

ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effects on students' cognitive development of a freshman composition course in which reading, writing, and discussion were integrated in an attempt to increase students' awareness of ambiguities, uncertainties, and complexities. The design of the one-semester course was derived from William Perry's theory of epistemological development, and primary instructional strategies were problem solving and reader response. To study the effects of the course structure, the work of six students was monitored closely through interviews and examination of their assigned writings (including journals and four essays). The essays were categorized into one of the following six categories of epistemological development (adapted from Perry): dualism, multiplicity pre-legitimate, multiplicity subordinate, multiplicity correlate, relativism correlate, and commitment foreseen. Results showed that the cognitive development of five students increased two or more levels. A case study of one student who initially resisted the approach but whose writing improved considerably further illustrates the success of the course design. The writing of this excellent student was flawed by her insistence on writing five-paragraph themes and by her dualistic thinking. Over the course of the semester, however, the student progressed to exploring real issues and discovering options--moving from dualism toward multiplicity. She ventured away from the five-paragraph structure, and her final essay began to exhibit a sense of writing to communicate. (Eleven references are attached.) (ARH)

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AN EVALUATION OF INTEGRATING LITERATURE IN THE COMPOSITION CLASS

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Eugene M. Baer

Abstract

While integrating reading and writing cannot effect cognitive development, such instruction appears to create conditions likely to enhance cognitive development.

To study the effects of integrated reading and writing instruction on the writing of college freshmen and assuming that most college freshmen operate at the positions called "duality" or "multiplicity pre-legitimate" in Perry's scheme, I used reading, writing, and discussion to expose students to differing views and ambiguous situations.

In this arrangement text informed text in every activity. Reading informed journal writing; journal writing, discussion; peer editing, the writing of the next draft.

During the semester, the positions at which students operated varied, depending upon a number of factors--current exigency and strength of prior beliefs apparently the most significant. Each of the students wrote at least one subsequent paper at a level of reasoning higher than that of the first essay. Four attained Perry's fourth position--multiplicity correlate or relativism subordinate. One attained Perry's sixth position--commitment foreseen.

This study suggests that conditions can be created to enhance cognitive development but that the levels at which students operate depends significantly upon present exigency and prior beliefs.

Introduction

To study the effects of reading on writing, I have employed a combination of reading, writing, and discussion activities in teaching English 101 not only to help students develop their writing processes but especially to enhance their cognitive development. This framework of reading, writing, and discussion causes texts to inform texts and texts and prior knowledge and experience to interact with and inform one another, not only sequentially, but especially recursively. This informing and interaction seems to provide multiple perspectives that help college freshmen move from what Perry calls dualism and toward multiplicity and relativism.

Course Design

My course design derives, then, from Perry's theory of epistemological development (see especially chapters four and five). It incorporates also Piaget's stages of cognitive development (Furth 27-33) as well as a number of theories of reading and writing: Larson's and Odell's problem-solving (Larson 629-30; Odell 36-38); Smith's psycholinguistic theories of reading (see especially chapter five); Holland's and Kintgen's reader-response theory (Kintgen and Holland 478, 483, 490-91; Holland 6-9); Rosenblatt's transactional theory (see especially chapter two; and Moffett's kinds and order of discourse (see especially chapter two). By combining selected features of

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these, I constructed a course using reading materials as integral parts of the writing process.

The units in this course utilized two primary instructional strategies--problem solving and reader response. These strategies spawned other activities intended to create exigency and to provide knowledge and information for processing texts and composing texts. Such activities included writing responses and summaries, discussing, reflecting, and predicting.

Within this design I also paired and sequenced texts to be read and arranged essays to be written so that both were likely to enhance synthesis of reading and writing experiences and activities. These texts were sequenced so that early texts were simpler in form than later ones and so that earlier texts explored topics and issues of more personal and immediate concern. Later texts moved increasingly to topics and issues of less personal, less immediate, and more universal concern.

The essay assignments were sequenced with this same concern for complexity of form and for immediacy and universality of topics and issues. Moffett's questions describing his modes and order of discourse ("what is happening?" "what happened?" "what happens?" "what will happen?" 32-54) served as an appropriate guiding principle for establishing the sequence of essays. Both Moffett's modes and orders and the sequence in this course design are further supported by Kurfiss' work with the theories of Piaget and Perry (Kurfiss 4-23). The Moffett-inspired sequence recognizes that many college freshman operate at concrete or transitional levels (Piaget) or at dualistic levels (Perry), so it begins with essays requiring simple identification of data but progresses to essays requiring developing concepts and making predictions based on data.

This course exposed the students to readings containing issues and conflicts, directed students to write about problems and solutions, and engaged them in discussions of these issues, conflicts, problems, and solutions to increase their awareness of ambiguities, uncertainties, and complexities. The goal of such exposure was also to enhance the level of cognition they brought to bear on readings, discussion, and writing and especially to investigate whether such levels of cognition would be apparent in their finished compositions.

Results

To study the effects of this course structure, I monitored closely the work of six students by interviewing them and examining their writing (including journals and four essays by each student).

To analyze these students' compositions, I employed working definitions adapted from Perry. With the exception of one unclassifiable essay, each of the compositions the students wrote appeared to fit into one of Perry's first six stages as modified below.

> 1) Dualism: The writer identifies and defends causes of and/or solutions to a problem as the correct and right ones, perhaps also insisting upon these as generalizable to larger

groups or population, perhaps even to everyone.

2) Multiplicity pre-legitimate: The writer recognizes that others may hold other ideas about causes and effects and/or solutions to problems, but that they are in error. Absolutes exist in all areas.

3) Multiplicity subordinate: A variety of causes, effects, and solutions may be identifiable, but, though we cannot yet determine which ones, one set of those we can identify or one set yet to be identified is right and correct. Absolutes exist in all areas.

4) Multiplicity correlate or relativism subordinate: In some areas, no absolutes exist. In these areas, many causes, effects and solutions may be evident, all of which may be right for someone; no one can determine causes, effects, or solutions with any degree of certainty for anyone except self.

5) Relativism correlate, competing, or diffuse: In areas where no absolutes exist we accept relativism and search for acceptable explanations of causes and effects and for acceptable solutions.

6) Commitment foreseen: No absolutes exist in many areas, and relativism must be accepted. Logical necessity requires making choices, committing oneself out of necessity to what one perceives to be the most reasonable or workable solution.

Figure One: Level of Cognition

	ESSAY			
SUBJECT	One	Two	Three	Four
1	D	MC	MC	MC
2	MP	MS	MS	MS
3	X	MC	RC	MC
4	D	D	MP	MP
5	MP	MP	CF	CF
6	MC	MP	MS	MC

D=dualism; MP=multiplicity pre-legitimate; MS=multiplicity subordinate; MC=multiplicity correlate or relativism subordinate; RC=relativism correlate, competing, or diffuse; CF=commitment foreseen

As Figure One indicates, the students did not progress

neatly from stage to stage, but that was not anticipated. First of all, as Kurfiss indicates, the levels at which individuals operate depends upon a number of factors such as interest, expertise, and individuals tend to regress when confronting something new (20-21). Secondly, the study might have more reasonably anticipated little variation for each student because this study covered but one semester. Perry's stages identified development over four years. So, the fact that five students varied two or more levels appears significant. Seemingly the course structure effected this varying of cognitive levels or positions by presenting the students with multiplicity through readings, discussion, and instructor and peer responses to drafts of compositions, a possibility supported by the discussions of the teaching implications of the Perry scheme discussed by Rodgers (3-14) and Kurfiss (21-23).

Terry: A Case Study

To illustrate farther how this approach affects student writing, I have intentionally selected a student who disliked and resisted the approach I have described for you.

Terry is a bright student who did well in high school English. She was taught to write five-paragraph themes. She learned this method, found it yielded success, and, since she considered anything less than A's as failure, expected to continue using this approach in college. She believed she should have been exempted from English 101 since, based on prior experience, she already wrote quite well. She viewed her task in this course as trying to figure out what the instructor wanted and giving just that, not to learn, but to get an A in the course. Consequently, she felt that peer editing was not only useless but also very uncomfortable because she couldn't write as she would have if only the instructor were her reader. In addition, she felt instructor comment was her only useful feedback.

Like many freshmen, Terry was a dualist. Her goal was not to explore issues in order to discover perspectives or to identify and evaluate solutions. Rather, her goal was a consequence of her training. Just as she had been taught to do, she began her papers with a thesis determined--with her mind made up--and set out to support her predetermined position. Though her writing teachers had almost certainly not intended to do so, they seem to have reinforced her dualist position.

When the course began, Terry described her writing process in these words: "Because [of the way] I've been trained in classes, I get the topic; I think about the thesis; [I] figure out my main points; and I think about examples for each one. And then I organize it [from] the weakest, the middle one, and then the strongest. Sometimes I go by quantity and sometimes I go by quality--which one is really strong and which one is weak." She also indicated that for her no more than two drafts, one to compose and one to correct surface errors, were needed.

By mid-term, Terry's view of good writing had been shaken a bit. Though she still disliked peer editing, from this activity she had discovered that others did not use her five-paragraph

theme approach and were successful writers, that is, got A's on papers. She was frustrated because she was still trying to figure out the instructor and claimed that sometimes the instructor told her to explain more and to give examples and at other times told her not to include the obvious. Though she still held to the five-paragraph theme approach, she was tempted to try what other students were doing because of their success. From reading the essays of her peers, she recognized that other approaches to and structures for writing might be at least as good as hers. She had moved slightly from dualism toward multiplicity.

Terry also felt that reading and response writing were unrelated to her writing, that these were just assignments to get out of the way. When the semester ended, Terry was still attempting to get A's in the course by trying to write what the teacher wanted.

However, while Terry maintained that the course was of no value to her, her writing did change.

Terry's first essay, "God and Me," revealed her dualism and indicated how well she had learned the five paragraph theme approach. Her introduction stated a clear subject--giving one's self to God; a definite thesis--"the hardest part . . . is not saying it, but rather, doing it"; and three points to develop--three influences (society, friends, and self) make the decision difficult to stick with. Then, Terry developed each of these points by explaining how each of these influences made her decision difficult to maintain. She wrote:

> There is one decision that I feel will determine the course of a person's life. That decision is whether nor not a person will give their life to God. The hardest part of the decision is not saying it, but rather, doing it. I am trying to do that now. I have found that the influences that are making this the hardest decision for me to stick with are society, my friends, and myself.

In her second essay, Terry tried to address another real problem--allowing others to take advantage of you. She presented three examples, using the experiences of her boyfriend with a rival for his affections. In the process, Terry revealed that the real issue she wanted to address was the effects of her boyfriend's experience on their relationship. She seemed to recognize that the effects were several and ambiguous, but also felt she had to identify and prove a point. Her attempt to write a traditional five-paragraph theme hindered her from and structuring her essay to accommodate the dimensions of this issue. The result was a paper that began addressing one issue but then switched to the real issue, but an issue she could not fit into the five-paragraph format. In reality, Terry ended with a paper at an advanced stage of prewriting. But Terry's tentative recognition of a real issue with several dimensions and her problems with structure indicate important progress toward multiplicity.

In her second last essay, Terry exhibited advanced recognition of multiplicity (commitment foreseen in the Perry

scheme). She explored solutions to the problem of when to marry. In five-paragraph theme fashion, she considered three possibilities--getting married while completing undergraduate study, interrupting education to get married, postponing marriage until completing education. She discussed the first two in a single paragraph each (six and four sentences, respectively). She quickly dismissed each but discussed the third, postponing marriage, at length (nearly three pages, representing almost seventy percent of her essay).

Though she began with a five-paragraph theme framework, and though this framework remained a flaw in her final draft, her essay explored the issue by recognizing several options, explored the chosen option, and recognized both positive and negative aspects of that option. Though Terry argued for a position, she did so recognizing that other options were also reasonable and satisfactory. Thus, her essay became a logical and reasonably and detailed argument for postponing marriage but, more importantly, exhibited identifiable movement toward relativism. Though Terry's final essay was rather personal and not as audience oriented as we might like, little of the five-paragraph framework was apparent. Here, Terry clearly stated a problem, explored causes and effects, identified a workable solution, and explained the effects of implementing this solution. Of special interest, she recognized ambiguities and uncertainties. She realized that several parts might comprise a workable solution, but that an ideal (absolute) solution might not exist. Her first, second, and sixth paragraphs illustrate this structure and level of cognition. Paragraphs one and two reveal the problem:

> I will not accept failure if it is something important that I am good at. I will push myself to succeed until I almost kill myself. Society has taught me that I should be the best that I can be. . . . This attitude that I have causes me many unnecessary problems (such as stress and lack of organization of my priorities), because many times I try so hard to succeed when the best thing for me to do would be to accept failure.
>
> When I set a goal for myself, I become very determined to achieve that goal. If I should fall short of achieving that goal, I will feel as if I have failed. Thus my determination becomes so strong that I refuse to accept defeat from any obstacle that I may encounter. When an obstacle does come along, I become very frustrated and insecure. So I work extra hard to make sure that I do not let it defeat me. I take up time and energy that I should be using on other responsibilities, and I apply that time and energy to the obstacle so that I do not fail. . . . The time and energy that I take from other areas causes me to fail there . . . .

Paragraph six seeks a solution but recognizes ambiguity and uncertainty:

In order to rid myself of these problems, I need to learn to deal with failure. Before I take time away from other responsibilities, I need to find the source of my failure. I need to analyze it to find out why I failed. Then I need to look at the different paths I can take. One path might be to correct my mistake if possible. Another might be to focus in on the problem better. Yet another might be to just accept the fact that I have failed and go on with life. Whatever path I decide to take, I have to stick with that decision. I cannot let the fact that I am failing at one thing make me fail at others.

Conclusions

Previously, Terry and the other students had been practicing these activities in three ways: by reading stories that present situations likely to stimulate discussion of problems and solutions, by writing responses exploring problems and solutions in the stories, by discussing with classmates these stories and responses, and by writing essays focusing on problems and solutions. The sequence had been one in which reading, writing, knowledge, and experience had been informing one another and had been enhancing recognition of multiple perspectives.

By the time the students wrote their final compositions, they had read a dozen or more short stories or essays and had written responses to each. In addition, they had written several other essays. These responses and essays had progressed from identifying real versus apparent problems, to identifying causes and effects of problems, to identifying solutions, to predicting consequences of solution, to selecting the best solution. This sequence of responses and essays seems to have led them to heightened levels of cognition.

While the students did not move neatly to increasingly higher levels of cognition, like Terry, each did achieve higher levels. Even though Terry's final essay does not succeed entirely because it is rather egocentric and expressive and because in it Terry exhibits a limited sense of writing to communicate, considering where Terry began, the essay exhibits important progress. Previously, Terry had clung to her five-paragraph theme approach and a dualism that precluded exploring issues or discovering alternatives. She, like the other students, progressed to exploring real issues and discovering options, that is, from dualism and toward multiplicity. This movement toward multiplicity influenced the way she structured her writing by influencing the way she thought about her topics. Structure became a logical consequence of the issue she was exploring.

As interview data revealed, these changes in Terry's writing process paralleled a change in her use of texts, knowledge, and experience. These changed from discrete to interactive and mutually informative activities. Very likely, this change in her use of texts, knowledge, and experience fostered the changes in both her cognitive processes and her writing process. Consequently, her progress in writing can probably be attributed,

at least in part, to her experiences in this course, a course in which reading and writing activities are selected and arranged to enhance students' reading and writing transactions and to help students synthesize immediate reading and writing experiences with prior knowledge and experience. Even more important, this approach seems to have enhanced cognitive development for Terry and the other five students included in the study.

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